CHAPTER 2
BARAK VALLEY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Barak Valley is the Southernmost region of Indian state of Assam and is situated between Longitude 92°15′ and 93°15′ East and Latitude 24°8′ and 25°8′ North, covering an area of 6922 Square Kilometres (Sq.Km). The region shares its borders with North Cachar Hills district and the state of Meghalaya in the North, the state of Manipur in the East; the state of Mizoram in the South; and the state of Tripura and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the West. Administratively, the region at present is comprised of three districts, viz. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Cachar is the largest district and Hailakandi is the smallest with total geographical areas of 3786 Sq. Km. and 1327 Sq. Km. respectively and area of Karimganj district is 1809 Sq. Km. In order to have a clear picture of the Barak Valley’s course of history, it is essential to have a picture of Assam state of which it forms a part.

2.1: THE STATE OF ASSAM:

Before India’s independence North East India comprised of North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), Manipur and Assam. The then Assam included today’s Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. However, with independence from the British and the persistent demands for autonomy by the different tribal groups, the states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura were carved out of Assam and today Assam is situated in the extreme North Eastern part of the India and lies between 24° 10′ N to 27° 28′ N Latitude and 89° 49′ E to 97° 26′ E Longitude. It is bounded by the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the North and North East, by Nagaland and Manipur in the East, by the states of Tripura and Mizoram in the South East, by Meghalaya in the South and West Bengal in the West and touches the international border of as many as four countries viz. China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

Barak Valley, comprising the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi, is the southernmost region of the present state of Assam.

Pre-independence Assam may be divided broadly into two physical units, 1) the North Eastern and Central hill tracts and 2) the valleys of the Barak and the Brahmaputra. On the North of Assam lies the Eastern Himalayan region, comparatively lower in elevation, and inhabited by the Mongoloid tribes’ viz. the Bhutias, Akas, Daflas, Abors, Miris, Mishmis, etc. This range continues towards the South East and joins the
**Patkai** hills which are the natural boundary between Assam (undivided) and Burma. The so-called Assam range in the middle is also occupied from the East to the West by the various tribes of the Nagas, Jaintias, Khasis and the Garos. On the South lie Chin and Lushai hills, Chittagang hill tracts and Hill Tipperah. Though bounded on three sides by mountain barriers, Assam was linked with the neighbouring countries of China, Burma, and Bhutan by several routes. Of them Assam - Burma route in the East, the one that runs through Cachar and Manipur helped the migration of the racial elements from South East Asia, another viz.-the *Patkai* route was followed by the Ahoms and other Tibeto-Burmans from the North East. The hill passes of Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal were also probably used by certain waves of Tibeto-Barmans. The most frequent route was on the West, the valleys of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, through which the Aryans penetrated in to Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa. Assam is thus located on one of the great migration routes of mankind.

The geography of a country has much to do in molding the character and destiny of her people. The physical division led to the emergence in Assam of two distinct ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups namely the dwellers of the hills and those of the plains. It has been suggested that the process of Aryanisation or Sanskritisation nearly completed in the valley of Brahmaputra by 1200 A.D. This was not the case of all those who have been for centuries living far away from the mainstream, in the relatively isolated and inaccessible and less fertile and agriculturally less productive region of forests, hills and mountains. They continued their identity in speech, traditional customs, usages, institutions and religious beliefs. Land was the backbone of their economy, but the nature and extent of the soil forced them to practice *Jhumming* or shifting cultivation. Rice was their staple food, but the meagre produce made it necessary to supplement it by hunting and fishing.

The physical barriers fostered in them, like city- states in ancient Greece - exclusiveness and a spirit of independence, intolerant of hegemony or outside authority. This tended to develop autonomous or self governing communities. J. H. Hutton (Hutton, 1828, p.11) rightly remarks, “institutions of this kind in the plains are as good as dead but in tribal areas they are untouched and working…elder or chief with his advisers settles the vast majority of disputes, villages have their own funds and village roads and bridges are kept up by communal unpaid labour.”
Natural barriers notwithstanding, through the passes and river routes for reasons economic or otherwise, there had been frequent intercourse between the people of the hills and the plains. The Hillmen, dependent by and large on the plains for their food stuff and other necessities, the plains man used to purchase the forbearance and good behavior of their neighbours by providing them their requirements. Some of them preferred even to settle in the plains or at the foothills, and consequently there had been a process of assimilation, though small, racially, linguistically and culturally.

The vocabulary of the Assamese language has been greatly strengthened by words used by the tribes. Assamese proverbs are brimful of references to customs of our tribal neighbors. The popular music and dance of Assam have been largely reinforced by borrowing from the tribal’s. Weaving which is universal among the Assamese women is also found amongst a large section of the tribal population. The tribal spirit of the Assamese Vaisnava monks has led to the conversion of a large number of tribal’s to the Hindu fold and they are as ardent devotees of Hinduism as their older co-religionists.

The Shillong Plateau, which forms the watershed between the two valleys of Brahmaputra and Barak, continues towards the East as North Cachar hills and joins the Naga Hills. The height of the plateau varies from 1220 to 2830 meters. The Valley of the Barak or Surma in the south comprises a small swampy flat plain interspersed by isolated low hills and ridges. The Valley of the Brahmaputra or Assam proper is a wide alluvial plain of about 720 K.M in length with an average breadth of 80 K.M. Through its entire length flows the river Brahmaputra or Lauhitya as it was formerly called. The Valley watered by these rivers is extremely fertile and the Brahmaputra forms the main artery of commerce and navigation. It is in fact the life line of Assam, and on its banks there developed in ancient time’s cities like Pragjotisha, Durjaya, Hadappeswar or Hatappeswara. Some of which had magnificent palaces, buildings, broad roads and other amenities (Barpujari, 1990, pp. 1-5).

Regarding the climate of ancient Assam, the evidences are very poor. All that we know from the Chinese traveler Huen-Tsang is that, “the country was low and damp” (Watter, ii. p.185). Shihabuddin Talish, the Muslim Chronicler who had accompanied Mirjumlah in his expedition to Assam in 1662 A.D informs us that, “it rains (in
Assam) for eight months in the year, and even the four month of the winter are not free from rain.” (Gait, 1994, pp.132-33).

Earthquake is also of frequent occurrence in the region under which structural monuments are liable to collapse and disintegrate in course of time. It is not surprising therefore that scarcely any ancient building is left to us prior to advent of the Ahoms in to the valley of Brahmmputra. On this ground Westmacott rightly observes, “...all classes, from the king to the serf, build homes with such light and perishable materials as grass, bamboo and timber. Their homes sustain little injuries from a shock however violent and if thrown down could not do much mischief to their inmates” (Barpujari, 1990, p 6). Nature is however very bountiful. She has lavished all her bounties in Assam. Her mountains contain mines of coal, iron-ore and limestone. Her rivers abound in gold-dust and her soil so well adapted to all kinds of agricultural purposes that it might be converted in to one continued garden of silk and cotton and coffee and sugar and the tea over the extent of many hundred miles.

In an extremely fertile soil under an enervating climate any race, however martial, would in course of time ‘become soft and luxurious’ incapable of defending itself against the incursions of the sturdy tribes in the neighborhood. This explains why the valiant Ahom rulers who had reduced to submission the Chutias, the Kacharis and the Koches and repelled the attacks of Mughals ultimately succumbed to the onslaughts of Burmese invasion.

2.1.1: SOCIO-CULTURAL-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND:

So far as philology is concerned, it is, of course, admitted that language is no real test of race. The Ahoms abandoned their tribal dialects in favor of Assamese, and Rabhas, Kacharies and other tribes followed their example. The reason in these cases is partly that Assamese was the language of the priests, who gradually brought these rude tribes within the fold of Hinduism, and partly that it was the language of a higher civilization. But, there is another way in which one form of speech may supplant another viz. by conquest when one nation brings another under subjection; it often imposes its own language on the conquered people. Thus, within the last hundred years the Shan tribe of Turungs, while held in captivity amongst the Singphos, abandoned their native tongue and adopted that of their captors. It may safely be assumed that one or other or both of these processes have always been in operation,
and that, just as Assamese is now supplanting Kachari and other tribal languages. These in their turn displaced those of an earlier generation. Though now the caste system preserves a distinct physical type, the earlier philological changes were accompanied by racial fusion. We know that this occurred after the Ahom invasion of Assam, when many Chutias, Morans and Borahi families incorporated in the Ahom tribal system and by lapse of time and inter-marriage, gradually came to be recognized as genuine Ahoms. They themselves are Shan, who according to an eminent authority are the outcome of an intermingling of Mons, Negritos and Chins. The Koches appear to have been originally a Bodo tribe, closely allied to the Mechtes and Kacharies, but many of them now present the physical characteristics of the Dravidians.

Some three or four thousand years ago a number of tribes of Aryan race entered India from the North West. Like the Dravidians, these tribes had a long head, but unlike them, they were tall and well formed, with fine and prominent, but not long noses and a comparatively fair complexion. They almost obliterated the earlier Dravidian in the Punjab and the adjoining parts of North West India while further East and South they produced a mixed race in which the Aryan elements diminishes as the distance from the Punjab increases gradually amongst the higher castes, more rapidly amongst the lower castes and eventually in the South disappears altogether.

From the opposite corner of India, through Assam and Eastern Himalayas there was a similar influx of tribes of Mongolian origin, whose main physical characteristics are a short head, broad nose, a flat and comparatively hairless face, a short but muscular Table and a yellow skin. In Assam (excluding the Surma Valley) and the North East Bengal the Dravidian type has to a great extent been replaced by the Mongolian, while in the Surma Valley and the rest of Bengal mixing of races has taken place in which the recognizable Mongolian element diminishes towards the West and disappear altogether before Bihar is reached.

The Aryan invaders spoke languages of the Aryan or Indo-European linguistic family, and languages of this family have now become the speech of the vast majority of the inhabitants of Northern India, where they have displaced not only those previously spoken by the Dravidian races but also to a great extent, those of the later Mongolian
immigrants. Except in South India, non-Aryan languages survive only in limited areas which were until recent times covered by forest and were difficult to access.

The Non-Aryan languages still spoken by people of the Dravidian physical type belong to two entirely distinct families of speech - the Dravidian and the Munda. Languages of the former family are spoken throughout Southern India and also by certain tribes of Chota Nagpur and the adjacent uplands. Other tribes in the latter area speak Munda languages. There are traces of the existence of allied former languages in the Punjab hills, but there are no indications whatever of their ever having been spoken in Southern India. The Dravidian linguistic family has no known affinity with any languages spoken outside India; nor, with the exception of a small tribe in Baluchistan, is it spoken by any people who are not Dravidians by race. The Munda family, on the other hand, is allied to the Khasis of Assam and the Mon-Khmer languages of Burma and belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family, this again is a branch of the most widely diffused linguistic family in the world i.e. the Austic which are spoken in many parts of South East Asia and in islands of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans as far as Eastern Islands of the Coast of South America. Though there are many exceptions, the majority of the speakers of this widespread linguistic family are Mongolian by race and recent research points to the Coast of Indo-China as the place where it probably originated.

These considerations suggest that the Dravidians originally spoke languages of the Dravidian family and that the Munda languages were imported by Mongolian immigrants through Assam or Burma whose distinctive physical type became merged in that of the earlier Dravidian inhabitants. In this connection it may be noted that the Munda speaking tribes used to erect monoliths in memory of their dead similar to those erected by the Khasis, who are of unmistakable Mongolian race and that traces of an apparently Mongolian physiognomy are occasionally to be seen amongst them. (Dutta, 1986)

The early political history of Assam is not recorded well. In Hindu Epics, Puranas and Tantric Literature there are numerous references to ancient Assam, which was known as Pragjyotisha in the Mahabharata and Kamrupa in the Puranas and Tantras. Its origin is mythologically explained as follows: - when Sati died of vexation at the discourtesy shown to her husband, Siva, by her father Daksha, Siva overcome by
grief, wandered around the world carrying her dead body on his head. In order to put a stop to his penance, Vishnu followed him and lopped away the body piece-meal with his discus. It fell to earth in fifty one different pieces and wherever each piece fell, the ground was held to be sacred. Her organs of generation fell on Kamagiri i.e. on the Nilachal Hill near Gauhati, and the place was henceforth held sacred to Kamakhya, the goddess of sexual desire. As Siva continued to do penance, the other gods became afraid that he would thereby acquire universal power and Vishnu accordingly dispatched Kamdev, the Indian cupid, to make him fall in love again and thereby break his penance. He succeeded in his mission, but so enraged was Siva as a result that he burnt him to ashes by a fiery glance in the centre of his forehead. Kamdev eventually recovered his original form and the country where this took place became known as Kamrupa. (Gait, 1994, p-11).

The legends connected with the political history begin sometime before Naraka, who established himself in Pragjotishpur after killing Ghataka of the Danava dynasty. From the epigraphic records and the narratives of Hieun Tsang we learn that Varmana dynasty established itself in Kamrupa and thirteen kings from Pusyavarman to Bhaskarvarman ruled it from 100 A.D to 650 A.D. After the Varmans, the country fell in to the hands of the line of Salasthambha (650A.D to 990A.D). They were succeeded by a dynasty founded by one Brahmapala and his line ruled up to 1138 A.D. and were succeeded by a fresh line of kings namely, the family of Arimatta from 1138A.D to 1228 A.D. Early in the 13th century the Ahoms, an offshoot of the great Shan stock of South East Asia under the leadership of Sukapha, established a kingdom of their own in the present district of Sibsagar. Subsequently they were involved in collision with the Mughals in the West and ultimately expelled them. The Ahoms ruled over Assam for about 600 years. One cause of this long rule was the soundness of their administrative system. The Ahoms had a Monarchical form of Government. In the early stages Kingship was hereditary, but gradually there were deviations from this system. Instead of the eldest son a king began to be succeeded by his brothers. The king was assisted by three ministers- they were Burha Gohain, Bar Gohain and Barpatra Gohain. They were strictly speaking advisors of the king, but when the kings were weak they virtually ruled. In times of chaos they would make and unmake kings. Of the three, the Burha Gohain usually acted as the Prime
Minister. To each of the *Gohains* were allotted territories and over these territories they exercised independent rights of sovereignty.

With the spread of dominion, the Ahoms appointed officers of whom the most important were the *Bar Barua* and *Bar Phukan*. *Bar Barua* was the head of the Executive and Judiciary. The *Bar Phukan* was the Viceroy, who conducted Political relations with Bengal, Bhutan and the Chieftains of the Assam Passes. The three *Gohain*, the *Bar Barua* and *Bar Phukan* were known under the collective name of *Patra-Mantri*.

Of the officials, who came next in rank to the *Patra-Mantris* were the *Phukans*. Then came the *Baruas* and the *Rajkowas*. There were also a number of *Katakis*, *Kakatis* and *Dalais*. The *Katakis* carried messages to foreign states, the *Kakatis* were writers, and the *Dalais* expounded the *Jyotish Shastras*.

To all higher posts involving military services, only *Ahoms* were appointed. Non *Ahom* natives of higher classes were eligible only for those higher posts which did not involve military service. In the *Ahom* kingdom the whole adult male population was liable to render service to the state as a labourers and soldiers. In this capacity they were known as *Paik’s*. Four *Paiks* constituted a squad known as ‘got.’ In time of war the *Paiks* fought as soldiers, in time of peace they were employed on public works.

In 1609 Mumai Tamuli *Bar Barua* under the direction of the king Pratap Singha, organized the *Paiks* in to groups’ referred to as, *Khels*. The *Khels* were of different grades – the smallest unit consisting of 20 *Paiks* was placed under an officer called a *Bora*; a hundred under a *Saikia*; a thousand under a *Hazari*; three thousand under a *Rajkhowa* or a *Barua*; and six thousand under a *Phukan*. The *Khels* were organized either on territorial or occupational basis. The social system of the *Ahoms* was liberal. The *Ahoms* who came with Sukapha were very few in number. Obviously they were compelled to increase their number by marrying from non *Ahom* tribes such as the *Barahi*, *Chutias*, *Koch*, *Kachari*, *Moran* and *Miri*. The non-*Ahoms*, thus assimilated were given the privileges and status of the ruling race. There were seven principal *Ahom* clans, who were well-known as ‘Satgharia’. There is no controversy regarding the first three clans to which belonged the royal family and the families of the *Burha Gohain* and the *Bar Gohain*. There are differences of opinion regarding the other four clans. There were some clans which were decidedly inferior and with these the
Ahoms of upper classes did not intermarry. Thus, some sorts of primitive caste system were practiced. (Acharyya, 2007)

Apart from the Ahoms there were people who had migrated from the West and settled in Assam permanently. As they were within the fold of Brahmanical religion, their society was guided by the caste system. In this caste ridden society the Brahmans occupied the highest position of honour; next to them came the Kayasthas. The caste of inferior status was Kumara, Tati, Kamar, Sonari, Kahar, Mali, Dobi, Haris etc. It will be noticed that all these castes were formed on occupational basis. The women in Assam enjoyed more freedom than their counterparts in other parts of India. The purdah system was not prevalent. There was a system of having some women attached to temples as dancers (Devadasis in the Brahminical structure). Again the households of nobles and princes held women, in addition to their wives as Ligiris. Some gallant women like – Mula Gabharu did actual fighting in the battle field. Women in Assam were expert weavers. In villages also they helped their partners both in sowing and harvesting seasons. (Acharyya, 2007)

During the rule of the Ahoms only the kings could build houses of brick and mortar. It is interesting to note that during this period different designs were specified for construction of houses by people of different status. Clothes both uncut and tailored were used. A Muslim observer writes, “They only wrap a piece of fine linen round the head and a waist-band around the middle, and place a chaddar on the shoulders. Some of their rich men in the winter put on a half coat like a jaket” (Gait, 1994). Women appear to have worn two garments – one upper and one lower. Thus, the dress of women of those days differs from the present day dress of Assamese women.

Slavery was prevalent in the Ahom period. The chief nobles cultivated their private estates with the aid of slaves. The slaves were at their master’s disposal, and they were not required to render service to the state. Sons of slaves became slaves; sometimes freemen became slaves by mortgaging their persons for loans. Slaves were bought and sold in open market.

In the society the distinction between the nobles and the common people was marked. The nobles enjoyed certain privileges which were denied to ordinary people. The nobles could wear shoes, ride on horses and travel in palanquins. Persons of humble birth who wished to wear the chaddar were obliged to fold it over the left shoulder,
and not over the right, as the upper class did. The Doms and Haris were distinguished by having a fish and a broom respectively tattooed on their foreheads.

So far as economy of the Ahom period is concerned it was self-sufficient. The people mainly lived in the self-sufficient villages. The number of towns was very small. The chief pursuit of the people was agriculture. Everyman, except the Brahmans, knew how to plough land, land being very fertile and population being very small, crop production was enough to feed the people. Industry and crafts were highly developed in the Ahom period. In this connection special mention may be made of the manufacture of silk which was of three varieties – Pat, Eadi, and Muga. It appears that there was a tradition of wearing gold ornament making and gold washing was an important industry. Many people were engaged in it. Assam also made great progress in the extraction of iron from ore.

During the Ahom rule, Assam had extensive trade relations with the neighboring countries like Bhutan, Tibet, and China. Through Bhutan there was a trade route to Kabul also but Assam’s largest trade was with Bengal. In the 18th century Assam’s trade with foreign countries declined as the Ahom rulers then adopted a policy of isolation.

Religious life of the Ahoms was dominated by Hinduism practiced mainly through three sects - Saivism, Saktaism, and Vaisnavism. Saivism was a popular religion during the rule of the Ahoms. Most of the prominent temples for the worship of Siva and his consort came to be constructed especially during the later part of the Ahom period. Saktaism was also a popular religion during the Ahom period but this sect did not enjoy royal patronage till the advent of the Tung Khungia Dynasty. All rulers since the time of Gadadhar Singha were devout Saktas, and following the rulers many nobles also embraced this sect. The Kamakhya temple had a special attraction for the masses. Vaisnavism or to be more exact neo-vaisnavism was preached in to Assam by Sankardev (1449—1569), when Naranarayan and Suhungmung were rulers respectively in the Koch and Ahom kingdoms. The religion of Sankardev spread very rapidly and after his death the Vaisnavas became divided in to many sects, such as Mahapurusia, Damodaria, Moamaria, etc. Many Satras grew up in the country and the Gosains of the Satras enjoyed great respect and prestige. Besides the Vaisnava, Sakta,
and Saiva deities, there were the Ahom gods and goddesses known as Deodhais and Bailongs worshiped by the Ahom priests.

There were Muslims also in the Ahom kingdom, though their number was very limited. The Muslims, who were taken prisoners during wars, had chosen to settle in this country and marry here. About their descendents Sihabuddin Talish writes, “…their descendents are exactly in manners of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with the Muslims. The Mohammedan who had come here from Islamic lands engaged in the performance of prayer and fasting, but were forbidden to chant the prayer or publicly recite the word of God” (Gait, 1994).

During the Ahom rule, literature and literary activities, with the patronage of kings, ministers and nobles, received encouragement. The period witnessed extensive translation of the Sanskrit epics and Puranas. The Puranas translated were Vishnu Purana, Brahmavaivarta Purana, Padma Purana, Markandeya Purana and Dharma Purana. In case of some Puranas, only selected portions were translated. As the translation was meant for common people, simple style was adopted and metaphysical discussion was avoided. Metaphysical portions were replaced by devotional songs. Under royal patronage, Harivamsa and some portions of the Mahabharata were also translated. One Raghunath Mahanta made an abridgement in prose of the Ramayana. He also composed two long narrative poems Adbhuta Ramayana and Satrunjaya, based on some floating Ramayana legends.

Another author of outstanding merit was Kaviraj Ram Narayan Chakraborty, the poet laureate under Rudra Singha and Siba Singha. He translated a portion of the Brahmavaivarta Purana and Padma Purana. Among his other works mention may be made of Sankha-Sura-Vadha, Gita Gobinda and Sakuntala Kavya. The Ahom court encouraged the production of literature on Erotic and Sexology. Some Sanskrit texts on Kamasutra were translated in to Assamese. They also encouraged the development of drama and theatre. Bhawana, special type of dramatic performance evolved in Assam during the Ahom rule. These Bhawanas were encouraged by the Ahom kings and these were held on distinguished occasions in the royal palace. Subject matter of Bhawana was taken mainly from the epics and the Puranas. During this period Sanskrit texts dealing with science were translated in to Assamese. The chief among
this class of literature is *Hastividyarnava* by Sukumar Barkat. The *Ghora- Nidhana*, a treatise on horse was compiled in this period. A treatise on training and treatment of hawks known as ‘Semar Vyadhi’ has also been discovered.

The most important literary development took place in the field of historical chronicles known in Assamese as ‘Buranjis’. It contains continuous chronicles of the Ahom rule. These were compiled by men who had a comprehensive knowledge of state affairs and who held high government offices. *Buranji’s* constitute an unprecedented golden chapter in Assamese literature. *Buranji’s* were also written about countries outside Assam as Padshah Buranji’s, a chronicles of the Sultans and Emperors of Delhi, Tripura *Buranji* and the Jayantia *Buranji*. Apart from the Buranji’s there were other classes of historical writings composed both in verse and prose. These were generally known as *Charit-Puthi* and *Vamsavali*. The *Charit- Puthis* are writings mainly on the life of Vaisnava saints. In the *Charita-Puthis* we find not only the lives and activities of the great saints but also see the social surroundings in which they lived and worked.

The *Vamsavalis*, sketch the lives and careers of important nobles. These supplement the information found in the *Buranji’s*. The most notable of the *Vamsavalis* are the Darrang *Vamsavalis* composed in verse during the later part of the 18th century. Next we have historical Ballads. The Ballads present popular versions of historical events. Among the Ballads mention may be made of *Barphukanar Git*, *Bakharabarar Git*, and *Padam KuwarirGit*. It is thus evident that, the Ahom period was very rich in historical literature-comprising of the *Buranji’s*, *Charita-Puthis*, *Vamsavalis* and Historical Ballads.

The Neo–Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Shankardeva ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam even as it developed a new genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of *Borgeets* (devotional hymns heralding a new classical school of music), *Ankiya Natsor Bhaonas* (a theatre form introduced for the first time by Srimanta Sankardeva and which became increasingly popular with the masses). It gathers themes from the Bhagavata-purana and the Ramayana as well as the *Satriya* dance as modes of conveying the principles of *Ek-Sarana-Zaam-Dharma*, centering around single minded devotion to Lord Krishna or Vishnu based on a spirit of equality and humanism which found concrete manifestation in the institution of the
A new school of painting was also developed by Srimanta Shankardeva, just like his dance and music, came to be known as the Sankari School of painting. It launched the regional drama movement in medieval India. For most of his works, Srimanta Sankardeva used the Assamese language of the period so the lay person could read and understand them. But for dramatic effect in his songs and dramas he used Brajvali, an artificial mixture of Braj language and Assamese. His work, Kirtana-ghosha containing narrative verses in praise of Lord Krishna was meant for community singing. A copy of the Kirtana-ghosha is found in nearly every household in Assam. Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples used many instruments for a dramatic effect in his songs and dramas. All these were innovated indigenously. Two of the most important of these instruments are the Khol (a form of drum with a unique acoustic property) and the Bortal (big cymbals).

The hallmark of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva is reflected in two distinctively unique institutions, viz., the Satra and the Namghar, both of which are intimately associated with the social, cultural as well as religious life of the Assamese society. The Namghar actually evolved as an offshoot, an extended wing or a miniature replica of the Satra institution. To create an atmosphere where single-minded devotion to God based on a fellowship of devotees or Bhakta under the guidance of a Guru or teacher could be achieved, the Satra institution was brought into existence and it became a well organized and popular institution within a century of its inception. In fact, the most distinguishing feature of Assamese Neo-Vaisnavism is the network of decentralized monasteries – the Satra, literally meaning “holy areas” each headed by a Guru (teacher) designated as the Satradhikar. At Tembuwani (Bordowa), the birth place of Srimanta Sankardeva, the saint set up his first Kirtanghar (prayer hall), with houses for the devotees within the compound and on the four sides of the Kirtanghar. The Kirtanghar was the nerve centre of the entire place. It was a long and open hall, where the devotees sat together to sing the glory of God. There was no idol in the altar, but only a book, generally the Bhagvata, symbolizing God. In addition to prayers and cultural functions, religious discourses were also held in the Kirtanghar. One of the functions of these Satras was to initiate aspirants to Neo Vaishnavism. This activity of initiation by the Satras prepared the ground for cultural integration of different sections of the Assamese society with increasing numbers of both tribal and non-tribal sections of the Brahmaputra valley.
population accepting the new creed, which had a strong democratic content based on a common code of conduct. It is important to recall that after Sankardeva’s death, the movement was no longer monolithic. Variations and multiple leaderships emerged with Sankardeva’s direct disciple Madhavdeva and his protégé Gopaldeva (Aka Gopal Atta) carrying forward the Sankarite tradition in its original vibrant form, thereby commanding a larger following than the other disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva, namely, Damordeva. The Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, by and large, remained confined to the western part of the Brahmaputra valley during his lifetime. After his demise, his chief apostle Mahapurush Madhavdeva succeeded him to be the head of the order. Madhavdeva, a man of vision and action, sent twelve disciples to different parts of Assam to spread the message of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma propagated by Sankardeva. By the end of the seventeenth century, ideological differences resulted in the emergence of orders or samhatis of Satras- (i) Purusha (ii) Nika (iii) Kala and (iv) Brahma. The Purusha samhati derives its origin from Purusottama Thakura, the eldest grandson of Srimanta Sankardeva. The Satras of this samhati were founded by the preachers belonging to Srimanta Sankardeva’s direct line or Purusha. This samhati lays emphasis on Naam or prayer. The Nikasamhati was founded by Mathuradas Burha-Ata and Badaluwa Padma-Ata. They organized their Satras in strict conformity with the rules and regulations prescribed by Madhavdeva and their adherents and paid great attention to outward cleanliness (nika). In this samhati, the position of Madhavdeva is more important than that of Srimanta Sankardeva, the latter being revered as the Guru (teacher) of their Guru. The Satras established by Gopaldeva and his successors formed the Kala-samhati. The Kala-samhatigave the guru a supreme position. It was more egalitarian in outlook and more liberal in matters of caste than other samhatis. Besides, the Satradhikars of these Satras preached mainly among the tribal and so-called backward or depressed people of the region. Though these Satras had caste Hindus in their fold, their disciples mainly consisted of people from the Kachari, Ahom, Kaivarta, Brittiyal, Chutiya and Moran communities. The most prominent Satras of this samhati were the Moamaria and Dihing Satras. The Moamaria Satra was distinguished by strong democratic traditions with a large congregation of people of Tibeto-Burmese origin. The Brahma samhati consisted of the sub-sects of Damodardevaand Harideva, two Brahmin disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva. Most of the Satras affiliated to this samhati were headed by Brahmin preceptors; hence the name Brahma samhati.
This saṃhati permits Vedic rites and devotional practices alongside Nama Kirtana and lays highest importance on Deva (God) in comparison to the other three fundamental aspects, viz., Guru, Nama and Bhakat. The genre of art and culture stemming from the Satras are part of a living cultural tradition. The Satras have been serving as the very custodian of the Assamese cultural identity. The first stage in the evolution of the Satra naturally began with Srimanta Sankardeva. But in his times, the religious association organized by him did not take the shape of a regular institution of a permanent nature. Sankardeva, as has already been mentioned earlier, began preaching at his native place Bordowa and built a Satra there. It was during the time of Madhavdeva and Damordeva that the Satra institution attained the second phase of its growth. The architectural structure of the Satra also received the final shape during this period. It thus came to possess the prayer hall (Namghar) and the Manikut with the wooden throne (Singhasana) attached to the former and containing a sacred scripture. The Satra institution, by the middle of the 17th century, firmly established itself and the royal authority had to accord recognition to Srimanta Sankardeva’s faith. Subsequently, the Ahom kings and nobles accepted Neo-Vaisnavism. The Satras played a great role in the social life of the people. The Hindu Assamese had now two affiliations: that of temporal allegiance to the state and the king, and that of spiritual submission to Neo-Vaisnavism and a Guru, the head of a Satra. The leaders of Neo-Vaishnavism by this time found a more peaceful and accommodating atmosphere to preach their faith and consequently numerous branches of Satras were established by family members and disciples of the principal Neo-Vaisnavite (religious) leaders of the 16th and 17th centuries. The period between 1650 and 1800 may properly be called the era of the growth of the branch-Satra (sakha-Satra). One component of the Satra institution, the Kirtanghar, became an integral part of every Assamese village in Assam over time. It became popular by another name too, the Namghar. Over time it came to be an integral part of every Hindu village of Assam. As a result every Assamese village came under the religious influence of one Satra or the other and its influence even penetrated gradually into the neighbouring tribal areas. The Satras gave Assam a rich religious literature, besides reviving and popularizing the art of classical music and dance. As institutions having an unmatched symbolic value and commanding deepest of reverence from all sections of the people of Assam, the role of Satras becomes immensely significant in terms of reaching out to the people. In this context one might mention the role of the Satras during the National Freedom
Struggle with special reference to the role played by the Satradhikar of Garmur Satrain Majuli situated in Jorhat District of Assam, Sri Pitambar Goswami. It was due to his efforts that the anti-opium and boycott programmes and eradication of untouchability became popular slogans and practices in the island even before the Congress adopted them seriously. Later, the Asom Satra Mahasabha was formed at the initiative of a few visionary Satradhikars or heads of Satras of such places as Jorhat, Sivasagar, Majuli, Nagoan, Kaliabor and Tezpur in Assam with a view to bringing coordination in the religious and cultural activities of the Satras across the different samhatis or orders. Originally launched as Satra Sanmilan in 1915, it subsequently came to be known as Satra Sangha and finally in 1990, it was renamed as Asom Satra Mahasabha. The organization has undertaken a number of steps in the direction of restoration of the atmosphere of peace and integration in Assam.

The description of Assam given above reveals a clear picture of the rich and varied socio-economic condition of the state during the medieval times before the British annexation. The land was ruled by the mighty rulers belonging to different dynasties in different periods of history. It was inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups divided into different tribes such as Bhutias, Akas, Daflas, Miris, Mishmis etc. bearing Negroid, Mongoloid and Caucasian racial stocks. Its topography was a mixture of both plain and hill areas.

The long rule of the Ahoms for about 600 years resulted in establishment of the sound administration which they had maintained with the help of officers in different ranks and positions like- Bar Barua, Bar Phukan, Bar Goahain, Bar Patra Gohain etc. arranged in a hierarchical system in a multi layered structure.

The socio-economic system was familiarizing with the system of Khel and Paik. The Paiks were the tiller of the land / labour and the Khel was the land grant which was closely attached to each other. Apart from the Ahoms, there were people who had migrated from the West and maintained Caste system where the Brahmins occupied highest position of honour. Several castes of inferior status like- the Kumar, Kamar, Sonari, Kahar, Mali, Dobi, Haris etc. mostly based on occupation also inhabited Assam. There existed a clear cut distinction in the standards of living between the kings and the commoners.
Slavery and slave trade was practiced in those days. A slave was to render service to his master and was not required to render service to the state. It was continued in the line of inheritance where the son of a slave became slave for generations and sometimes the freemen became slaves by mortgaging their persons for a loan.

The economy of the state was very stable and self-sufficient. People were living in the villages with bounty of cultivable lands and produced goods required for their consumption. Other than the staple food, the production of high quality silk in the form of *Pat*, *Eadi* and *Muga* and practices of wearing, gold, gold washing, extraction of iron from ore also prevailed. It maintained good commercial relations with the neighbouring countries.

Hinduism was the common religion practiced in different forms like- Saivism, Sakttaism and Vaisnavism. However with the emergence of Sankardeva, a new religion less dogmatic and more flexible, a mixing of all tradition in the form of *Ek-Sarana-Naam-Dharma* i.e. the *Neo-Vaisnavism* became popular during 16th century. Assamese language was emphasized in all practices, but for some special purposes *Brajavali*, a mixture of *Brajo* and Assamese was used. All the religious practices of *Neo-Vaisnavism* centred round the *Satras*, which appeared as a centre of learning in the form of decentralized monasteries. *Namghars*, *Kirtanghars*, were attached to the *Satras*, besides the religious discourse and practices; discussions were arranged on secular issues and on common life skills. No figurative god or godhood was present in the *Satras* except a copy of the holy book *Bhagabhata*. The *Neo-Vaisnavism* became popular among almost all the sects and groups of people including the tribal. A type of cultural assimilation took place between the tribals and the non-tribals accepting the new creed based on democratic principles and common code of conduct. It gives a composite shape to the Assamese identity emphasizing on the cultural practices of the inhabitants. The influence of the “cultural life world”, created by the neo-Vaishnavite movement, was so strong that the Ahom nobility had embraced it in order to legitimize their rule. It reduces to a larger extent the narrow identity or affinity towards particular tribes into a broader Assamese identity. Inspite of its popularity and spreading mission, it could not embrace more areas under its fold and remains highly confined to Brahmaputra Valley.
Assam was also inhabited by the Muslims for centuries, even before the coming of the Ahoms. The Muslims to a larger extent adopted and acquired the native culture, language etc. and mingled with the multi-ethnic social fabric of the then Assam and made themselves rooted along with their own cultural affinity. Muslim settlers were engaged by the Ahom kings as security guards, workers in kings’ fire arms manufacturing as well as minting workshops (Choudhuri:1982). Muslims were good at making copper utensils and this industry was monopolized by them in medieval Assam. They were also employed to carry out finer artistic works in temples. Tailoring was another occupation which Muslims were good at. Their Bengal connection helped them to carry out trade and commerce across Assam and Bengal. In fact, prior to the arrival of Marwari traders, during the colonial period, Muslims played a significant role in this sector. Some of the early Muslim settlers also worked as musicians and singers, shoe makers and japi manufacturers (Barua: 1989).

The literary practices prevailing in Assam, like other parts of the world were mostly attached with religion. The knowledge which had its utility and relevance to the day to day life situation was emphasized. As the society was divided based on activities, the people got education suited to their occupation. The curriculum was different for different groups of learners; the methods of teaching, duration of the course, medium of instruction etc. were not uniform. The people respected education and the educated, in the court there was a learned gathering of the scholars, popular discourse on common issues, literary practices like – composing the poem, recitation, writing the treatise were highly encouraged. The record keeping in the form of Buranjis on different issues like-administration, social conditions and other forms of historical writings like- Ballads, Charit Puthis, Vamshaballies signify the lore of the Assamese in the past. The practices of some secular branches of knowledge like- Ayurveda, Dhanusvidya, jyotishsasatra, tarkavidya etc. also were learnt those days. The period also witnessed extensive work of translation of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Purana, Tantra, etc. from Sanskrit to the local Assamese language.

The Ahoms ruled Assam uninterruptedly for six hundred years. They established a strong and stable government, gave peace and prosperity and happiness to their subjects and successfully resisted many foreign invasions. But during the closing years of the Ahom rule, on account of the incompetence and inefficiency of the monarchs and mutual rivalry among nobles, the Ahom monarchy fell into decadence.
For the Burmese, who were invited by Badan Chandra Barphukan to defend him against other warlords ultimately occupied the entire kingdom of the Ahoms. The Burmese occupation of Assam may have been short lived, but it was marked by the total ruin of the country and its people. Raja Gaurinath Singha sought the help of the British to drive the plunderers out of Assam. Again Badan Chandra Bar Phukan tried to satisfy his own ambition with the help of the British. On being refused, he went to seek Burmese help. After the first Burmese invasion, Badan Chandra regained his power, and taking a huge amount of indemnity they went back to Burma. The second invasion of Burmese took place in 1819. This time round, the Burmese wanted to annex Assam to the Burmese dominions. They soon became greedier and created disturbances in areas under the British control – the British soon declared war against them. The Anglo-Burmese war began in 1824 and came to an end with the formal signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo on 2nd February, 1826. According to the terms of this treaty, the Burmese renounced their rights on Assam as well as the neighbouring kingdoms of Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur. The Treaty of Yandaboo also marked the end of the Ahom monarchy and established the British sovereignty in Assam. With this treaty we make the transition from the Medieval to Modern Age in Assam.

After the occupation, the British divided Assam into two provinces, Lower Assam and Upper Assam. Lower Assam comprised of Kamrup, Nowgang and parts of Darrang with its head quarters at Guwahati. Upper Assam comprised the other parts of Darrang, from Biswanath to the river Buridihing with its head quarters at Rangpur. The Treaty of Yandaboo marked the termination of Ahom rule in Assam. Since the prospect of revenue income from Lower Assam was bright, it was brought directly under the British dominion. Under the Burmese invasion Upper Assam had suffered a lot; the administration had broken down; the people had lost all confidence in the government. It was therefore necessary to put Upper Assam under direct military control. David Scott was appointed as the Senior Commissioner of Lower Assam and Colonel Richard was appointed as the Junior Commissioner of Upper Assam. In the beginning, the people of Assam were very happy with the British administration. The common people of Assam had suffered a lot during the Burmese invasion – they now saw hope for peace and prosperity under the British. Also, the ruling classes thought that under the British rule their power and privileges would be secured. But this, however, was not to be. It was soon palpable that the British administration was
different; all they cared for was their business, and their own prosperity. Soon, discontent among the people started growing and fresh revolution occurred in different places in Assam like the uprising by Gomodhar Konwar, the Ahom Prince and also the Khasis and the Singphoes were prepared to revolt against the British, but ultimately the British defeated them.

The responsibility of administering the newly annexed Assam was placed under the most efficient David Scott, the Commissioner who consolidated his administration in the collection of revenue and maintaining the police force. He was not interested in introducing a new type of administration; rather wanted to continue as far as possible by retaining the old system of administration. He was also not in a mood to annex the Upper Assam considering the sentiment of the local people and placed Purandar Singha in the throne, the latter agreeing to fulfil some conditions like- he would pay Rs. 50,000 annually as tribute and he would act under the advice of the British Political Agent. In return, he would be protected from external aggression. Initially, Purandar Singha was not aware of the danger of the agreement, but with the passage of time he realized the inability of obeying the agreement. There were political difficulties galore in the region as he was approved by the British, but the Assamese people and the nobles wanted Chandrakanta Singha as king instead of him, consequently Purandar Singha could not keep up the agreement with the British which gave the British ample and legitimate reasons to support their annexation of Assam. Finally, in 1838, Upper Assam was formally annexed to the British dominion in India. In other words the foundation of the British rule in Assam was laid. The annexation of Khasi Hills in 1834, Jaintia Hills in 1835, Cachar Plain in 1832, Cachar Hills in 1854, Naga Hills in 1866, Garo Hills in 1869, Lusai Hills in 1898, Sadiya and Mataki in 1842, consolidated the British administration in the state of Assam.

Thus, the introduction of British rule brought some qualitative changes in the socio-economic life of the people of Assam in general and Surma-Barak Valley in particular. The old pattern of administration got changed, the revenue system was revived, educational establishment began its journey, new opportunities opened up on a large scale, facilities for trade and commerce increased, middle class emerged, the means of communication gradually improved, opportunities for jobs opened etc. All these were initially treated by the natives as the benevolent work of the British administration, but gradually they realized the actual motive of the British that
whatever the British Government did, it was not in the interest of the Indian people, but to consolidate their own position in India.

2.2: THE BARAK VALLEY:

Before embarking upon the main theme of our study, it would be worthwhile to present a brief sketch of the socio-cultural history of Barak valley. In order to understand the contemporary society and issues involved therein, it is imperative to look into the relevant past. Hence an attempt is made here to look back into the past, particularly into the nature of society in the pre-colonial Surma Valley and the process of its transformation under the colonial rule. A study of this process of transition would enable us to understand the forces that facilitated the rise of nationalism, particular kind of regionalism and multiple varieties of localism and how and when these forces contradicted one another and how and when they worked in unison as the situation so demanded and the influence of these processes on the progress of education in this region.

The present districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi of Southern Assam are together known as Barak Valley as the river Barak passes through them. The Valley is bounded on the North by the North Cachar (Dima Hasao) and Karbi Anglong Hills District and Meghalaya state, on the East by Manipur, on the South by the state of Mizoram and on the West by the Sylhet district of Bangladesh and the state of Tripura. It is situated between Longitude 92° 15” and 93° 35” East and Latitude 24° 8” and 25° 8” North.

The Socio-Political study of any region should begin with a study of its population. It is to be mentioned here that due to the non availability of the relevant data, it is difficult to produce any direct evidence to construct socio-political scenario of this region during the early period. However, the Nidhanpur Copper plate of Vaskar Varman is the earliest indispensable material evidence of socio-political composition of the Surma-Barak Valley. From this inscription one comes to know that a portion of the Valley was known as Chandrapura Visaya in early sixth century. Between 11th and 18th centuries, the region played a dominant role in the political development of Eastern India as the core zone of Harikela Kingdom. In the 10th century Sri Chandra of the renowned Chandra Dynasty of the Eastern Bengal annexed a major portion of
the valley within his kingdom. From the two Bhatera inscriptions of Govinda Keshaba and Ishandeva, it is learnt that the region was an independent kingdom named *Srihatta Rajya* within which the whole of modern Sylhet and major portion of Cachar and Karimganj were incorporated. The common historical process of Surma Barak Valley as it was called then took a new turn when Hajrat Shah Jalal conquered Sylhet region in the early 14th century. Subsequently, the region was conquered by the Koch king Chila Rai, who put it under the control of one of his officials who made the entire plain of Cachar as an administrative zone. After the death of Chila Rai, Koch kingdom disintegrated and the officer-in-charge of Cachar, in no time freed himself from his overlord and started functioning as an independent ruler. About the middle of the 18th century the Kachari king received the Valley as dowry and sometime between 1700 and 1750 the king being chased away by the Ahoms shifted the royal courts from Maibong to Khashpur permanently. Since then, the kingdom was known to the local inhabitants of Sylhet as Cachar, because it is an outlying place skirting the mountains. During the Cachari rule numerous emigrants of Bengalee origin came to Cachar from Tripura, Mymonsing, Rongpur and Sylhet and settled there permanently. Due to regular interaction between the immigrants and the native residents, a socio-cultural bond was developed among them. The successive waves of migration at different times and from different directions made the population of Cachar diverse with a multiplicity of races, religions and cultures. Despite the predominance of Mongoloid origin of the ruling class, Hinduism played a very important role as it could embrace within its fold most of the social groups through the ongoing process of Sanskritisation. Ever since, Khaspur became the permanent Capital of Kachari Rajas, they took the initiative to attract more settlers from adjacent Bengal to make this fertile land economically more viable and socially more advanced. Accordingly, a large number of migrants both of the Hindu and the Muslim origin poured in to Cachar and converted the wild areas into popular agricultural region. The people of Upper Castes like Brahmins, Kayastyas and Baidyas flocked to Cachar seeking employment in Royal Court and they played a decisive role in shaping the society and polity of pre-colonial Cachar. The Kachari Royal Court accepted Bengali as the official language and Bengalee culture as their way of life. The king maintained all official records in Bengali as many of his officials were Bengaleees. During the Dimasa rule the Rajas were converted to Hinduism and were influenced by Brahminical Cult and at their initiative the process of Sanskritisation spread rapidly.
Bhubaneswar Bachaspati, a Court Poet translated *Bhagavata Purana* into local dialect and read daily in the Royal Court. Vedic tradition traceable to very common religious rituals was observed by the majority Hindu population of Cachar. They adhered to Brahminical Hinduism and at the same time continued to follow certain rituals and practices of the local origin. Beneath the surface of Brahminical superstructure, some native indigenous and non-scriptural features also existed. The people practiced festivals like- Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Rasyatra, Kartik Puja, Sankranti, Dolyatra and like. Moreover, Pan Indian *Bhakti* Movement propagated by the illustrious son of Sylhet, Sree Chaitanya, attained popularity with its rich culture backed by rich literature and obviously helped in de-tribalising the society and helped the easy process of assimilation amongst the diverse social groups in Cachar. Muslims of Cachar predominantly belong to Sunni Sect. The most distinguished aspects of Muslims in Cachar were that in spite of their religious differences, linguistically they contributed a peculiar synthesis of Islam and Hinduism. Their social life is often characterized by a curious mixture of Hindu and Muslim rites and rituals. The socio-cultural life of the Muslims showed a co-existence and interaction of Islamic culture and local culture that became Islamized. In Barak Valley, various elements of Hindu social organization have percolated into the social life of the Muslims and vice-versa. This is partly due to the influence of the majority community on the social life of the minority and partly due to the large scale conversion of the Hindus to Islam at different historical periods. Both the communities harmonize their social relations according to the dictates of folk traditions (Hunter, 1879).

### 2.2.1: HISTORICAL ROOTS:

The undivided Assam was under the administrative jurisdiction of Bengal Presidency till 1874. The two districts viz. Sylhet, which was Bengali speaking, and Cachar which was essentially inhabited by various tribal groups, being contiguous with Sylhet had a sizeable population of Bengali speaking people who ultimately became the majority as the tribal groups gradually adopted their modes of culture, language and life style were together known as Surma Valley Division since the districts were transferred to Assam in 1874. Till 1874, it was administered as Dacca Division of Bengal. The Valley is named after the principal river of the Sylhet viz-Surma, which is an offshoot of the main river Barak of Cachar District. The river Barak rises on the slopes of the lofty range which forms the Northern boundary of Manipur, descends
into the plains in Jiribum and flows across the Cachar district and a small portion of the Hailakandi to reach Badarpur in Karimganj district. It goes further to Haritikar where it is divided into two branches viz-Surma and Kushiara. Surma advances further through the Jaintia Parganas, Sylhet, Chattak, Sunamganj etc. enters Maimonsingh- forming the boundary between Maimonsing and Sylhet District. Kushiara further divides into two directions of Northern and Southern tide at a little distance from Karimganj. The Northern branch of it is called Bibiyani and Kalni in some distant area, eventually merges with Surma near Ajmiriganj at Sylhet Maimonsigh border. While the Southern branch bearing the original name Barak crossing Habiganj and Nabiganj town ultimately joins the Surma near Dhirai, where it takes the name Dhakeshwari and finally meets Brahmaputra near Bairab Bazar in East Bengal.

Thus, the river Barak after crossing a long course of more than eight hundred kilometers in Surma Valley assumes the name Dhakeshwari in Maimonsingh, later on meets Brahmaputra and then merges in to Megna, and eventually flows into the Bay of Bengal. Thus, geographically the Surma Valley is inseperable from Bengal and rightly considered as a little extension of Bengal. Similarly, there is a close relationship between the inhabitants of Surma Valley and the Eastern districts of Bengal so far as the different socio-cultural and political aspects are concerned.

Sylhet including the Jaintia plains, is bounded on the North by the District of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills; on the East by Jaintia Hills for short distance, and by Cachar as far as the Chattachura mountain, which is the extreme South Eastern point of the District; on the South by the semi independent state of Hill Tipperah and the Regulation District of Tipperah; and on the West by the Bengal District of Maimonsingh. The boundaries of Sylhet District as well as of the several thanas included in it were fixed by a notification of the Government, dated 18th June 1874.

It is supposed that the ancestors of the present Brahmans of Sylhet immigrated into the District during the eleventh century. The story goes that Adisur, a king of Bengal, wishing on a certain occasion to perform a great sacrifice, and finding the Brahmans of Bengal to be ignorant and unfit for such an august ceremony, sent for five Brahmans from Kanauj (Oudh), and afterwards so persecuted the native Brahmans that many of them took refuge in remote parts of the country. From these exiles the
Sylhet Brahmins are held to be descended. The Musalmans are said to have first entered the District in the latter part of the 14th century. Sylhets appears to have been conquered by a small band of Muhammadans in the reign of the Bengal King Shams-Uddin (1384 A.D.). The supernatural powers of the last Hindu king, Gaur Gobind, proved ineffectual against the still more extraordinary powers of the Fakir Shah Jalal, who was the real leader of the invaders, although he subsequently made over the active management of secular affairs to the nominal leader Sikandar Ghazi. At this time, the District was divided into three divisions – Gor (Sylhet), Laur, and Jaintia; only the first of these was then conquered, the other two remaining independent. After the death of Shah Jalal, the District as then constituted was included in the kingdom of Bengal, and put in charge of a Nawab. In the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar it passed with the rest of Bengal into the hands of the Mughal Emperors, and from that time was ruled by an amil (locally known as a Nawab), subordinate to the Nawab of Dacca. Sylhet passed in to the hands of the British in 1765, together with the rest of Bengal.

Sylhet consists of the Lower valley of the Barak or Surma river—an alluvial plain about seventy miles wide, bounded north and south by high mountains and opening west towards the delta of Lower Bengal. The greater part of the District is a uniform level, only broken by sandy hillocks called tilas, intersected by a large number of rivers, water courses, and drainage channels. During the rainy season—from about June to October—the torrents that pour down in cataracts from the hills, together with the heavy local rainfall, convert the entire surface into a boundless sea of water, amid which the village sites appear as islands, and the only means of communication is boat. The village sites and all the higher lands are embowered in groves of bamboos, palms and other trees. In the neighborhood of Sylhet town, the tilas, or sandy hillocks referred to above, rise to a height of twenty to eighty feet. In most parts they are overgrown with grass jungle, but some of them have recently been cleared for the cultivation of tea. The town of Sylhet is only about fifty five feet above sea level, and large portions of the District are considerably lower.

There are no mountains in the district, but in the South of the district there are eight hill ranges running in to the plains. These hills all run north and south and occur in the following order, starting from the westward: i. Raghunandan Range: area 61 square miles, ii. Dinarpur or Satgaon Range: area 107 square miles, iii. Balisira Range: area
101 square miles, iv. Bhanugachh Rajkandi Range: area 5 square miles, v. Saragaj or Langla Range: area 81 square miles, vi. Patharia Range: area 47 square miles, vii. Duhalia or Pratapgarh Range: area 359 square miles, viii. Sarispur or Siddeswar Range: area not available. All these hills are overgrown with dense jungle or brushwood, marked as impenetrable. (Hunter, 1879)

The Barak with its branches constituted the main river system of the district. This river rises in the independent state of Manipur, and after flowing for about 180 miles through the Unsurveyed Mountains, entered British territory in Cachar, and at once becomes navigable. It first touches on Sylhet from the neighboring District Cachar at Badarpur, and flows in a westerly direction for about seven miles, forming the boundary between the two Districts. At the village Bhanga, it divides in to two large streams, the Surma and the Kusiar.

Socially and culturally, Cachar plains always maintained close contact with neighboring Sylhet District since the time immemorial. Nihar Ranjan Roy in his book ‘Banglar Itihas’ aptly summarizes the situation, “…The Barak Surma Valley is nothing but the extension of the Meghna Valley (Dacca, Mymonsing and Komilla). There is nothing like the natural boundary between those two Valleys and that easily spread in to Cachar in ancient and medieval period. Even now the Society and Culture of the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet and Cachar is bound with the Eastern district of Bengal in one thread.” (Roy, 1939).

Before the coming of the Turk-Afghan culture that was flourishing in Surma Valley, the area was the local manifestation of the Bengali culture. After the Turkish conquest of Bengal, Surma Valley became culturally a part of Bengal as after the conquest, a number of Brahmmins and affluent section of Bengalees began to settle permanently in the region and amidst changes in governing power, the language that was flourishing in the Valley was Bengali. During the Mughal rule, local records and documents were written in Bengali and the court language of the Dimasa rulers was also Bengali. With such Linguistic and Cultural background, Sylhet and Cachar became a part of the Company’s rule. Bengalee character of the Cachar district was recognized by the British Government as early as in 1834, when Superintendent T. Fisher wrote, “…the entire instruction of this district is to be conveyed in the Bengali
Thus, the society of Cachar plains as well as its Bengali character is not of very recent origin.

J.B. Bhattacharjee (Bhattercharjee, 1997) writes- a natural extension of Bengal plain, the Cachar valley was peopled by the Bengalis. For some time, in the medieval period the Valley was under the Tipperah and their capital was at Khalangshah on the bank of the river Barak, but the Tipperah gradually migrated to the Tipperah hills. The British records and the records of the Hiremba Government testify to the existence of large Bengali ‘Khels’ in the Valley. The official language of the Hiremba Government was Bengali and the inscriptions and coins were inscribed in Sanskrit in Bengali scripts. The high officials and ambassadors were Bengalees. The Raj Darbars were adorned by a galaxy of Bengalee scholars and some of the Rajas were well-known for their contribution to Bengali Literature. Krishna Chandra and Govinda Chandra made correspondence with East India Company’s Government in Bengali.

Despite their Bengali character the districts of Sylhet and Cachar were cut off from Bengal in 1874 and tagged on to Assam by the colonial administration. The tagging of the Bengali majority of Sylhet and Cachar was resented by the people of these districts. Besides, it re-inforced the fear of the Assamese people of Bengali domination over them. This fear had been haunting the Assamese mind since 1826, when Assam was annexed by the British which was followed by the replacement of Assamese officials by Bengali ones and the introduction of the Bengali as official language in Assam. In 1874, Assamese was restored as the official language and the medium of instruction in educational institutions. This, however, did not allay the fear as the Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara were tagged to Assam making Bengali speakers majority in Assam.

This fear in the mind of the Assamese was to play a dominant role in Assam politics in the years to follow especially in the crucial years preceding partition of the country. It is alleged that the Assamese leadership was eager to get rid of Sylhet and that is why the Assam Congress dominated by the Assamese middle class elite did not show much interest in mobilizing support in favor of Sylhet’s retention in India. The intention of the Assamese leadership towards Bengali became clear in the initial hours following independence which naturally left the Bengalees of Barak Valley feeling alienated within the new arrangement. In 1947, Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of
Assam declared, ‘undoubtedly, Assam is for the Assamese.’ The intention of the ruling elite also became clear from the inaugural speech of the Governor Sir Akbar Haidary, dated 5th November, 1947 in Assam Assembly, which reads as, “The natives of Assam are now masters of their own house. They have a Government which is both responsible and responsive to them. They can take steps that are necessary for the encouragement and propagation of Assamese language and culture and of languages and customs of the tribal people who are their fellow citizens and who also must have a share in the formation of such policies. The Bengalee has no longer the power even if he had the will to impose anything on the people of the hills and Valley which constitute Assam. The basis of such feelings against him as it exists is fear, but now there is no cause of fear. I, would, therefore, appeal to you to exert all the influence you posses to give the stranger in our midst a fair deal, provided of course, he in his turn deals loyally with us.” (Kar, 1999)

All these are indications of how the ruling elite of Assam after independence had taken for granted the desirability of Assamese language and culture for all. Taking it for granted that people living in Assam must have to be identified with the Assamese pattern of life, the ruling elite made an attempt to impose Assamese culture on non-Assamese groups living in Assam. This may be termed as Assamisation which along with the natural geographical isolation of Barak Valley from the mainland of Assam constituted the background of the movement for the state hood of Barak Valley especially in the post independence era.

2.2.2: DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF BARAK VALLEY:

Our understanding of the society would be incomplete unless we study the demographic composition of pre-colonial society of Cachar. Due to non availability of the relevant data it is not possible to give a detailed picture of the population pattern of that period. However J.B.Bern’s description makes the situation a bit clear. He explained, ‘...the inhabitants of Cachar are stated to be 50,000 consisting of small population of Kacharies, large population of Musalmans and a small population of Hindus.’ (Hunter, 1879)

At the time of conducting the Revenue Survey in 1870 an attempt was made to enumerate the houses in the settled portion of the district, which were returned at 18,432 showing a population (taking five as the average number of inmates for each
house) 92,160. Besides these there were about 30,000 labourers employed in the tea gardens; and Mr. Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner in 1870, estimated the number of hill men within the district at 30,000. According to these estimates, the total population would be 1, 52,000 souls. Major Stewart, however, estimated the population at 2, 20,000 of whom 50,000 were Hindu Bengalis, 25,000 Hindu Manipuries, 80,000 Musalman Bengalis, 5,000 Musalman Manipuris, 30,000 people of various hill tribes, and 30,000 Hindustanis, principally imported labourers of tea gardens. The European population was estimated to number about 200 souls. (Hunter, 1879)

In 1871-72, a regular Census of the settled portion of the district comprising an area of 1285 square miles was taken by the order of the Government. The result showed a total population of 2, 05,027. Out of these 1, 10,373 were males, and 94,654 females. Classified according to religion, the total Hindus appeared 1, 28,219 or 62.5% of the district population; the Muhammadans were 74,361 or 36.3% of the district population; the Buddhists were 49; the Christians were 409; other denominations were 1989.

The Manipuris were, after the Bengalis, the most numerous and important race inhabiting Cachar. In religion they were divided between Hindus and Muslims. They are tall and well made, and of a fair complexion. In character they were cunning and treacherous in dealings with those who were not of their own race; but on the other hand, they seemed to behave with great honesty to one another and their fidelity to their leader was remarkable. The Manipuris of Cachar were a purely agricultural people, and had for many years acted as the pioneers of cultivation in the district. They used to clear the jungle and cultivate the land until the first demand for revenue was made, when they threw up the holding and took up a fresh piece of jungle. The land which they abandoned after having made it valuable was of course, immediately occupied by Bengalis. The Manipuris, however, after some time discovered that this practice was not profitable. They now settled permanently on their grants and formed some of the most flourishing villages in Cachar. The men merely sow their fields and reap the crops. The women husk the rice and take the surplus to the market as well as the produce of gardens which they cultivate themselves. All the clothes worn were manufactured by the women. The national dish of the Manipuris is a kind of salad called ginchu, made of plantain leaves, dried fish, pulses and chilies chopped up
together. This is universally eaten with rice and forms their principal food. The usual dress of the men is a *dhuti* and a short jacket. The clothing of the women consists of a colored cloth tied tight under the shoulders just above the breasts, fitting closely to the body and legs and reaching nearly to the feet. (Hunter, 1879)

**2.2.3: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIFE OF THE PEOPLE:**

The Cacharies were originally a hill tribe, their home being apparently among the hills to the North of Brahmaputra. Captain Fisher, the first superintendent of the District, who took a great pain in ascertaining the early history of the race, was of the opinion that this rude tribe gradually acquired an empire over Assam, Sylhet, Maimonsing and the Valleys to the east of the Brahmaputra, their original seat being at Kamrup; and that their rule ultimately embraced everything from Kamrup down to the sea. They built brick cities and it is supposed that the Tipperah Raja was a younger son of the house, the original empire being divided into a northern and southern part. The Cachari king developed an aristocracy around him, distinguished by the title of Barman; but with this exception, the original tribe remained pretty much in its primitive state of barbarism. This latter portion of the tribe called Dans or Parbattias by the Bengalies still occupies the hill country of Nowgong to the south of the Brahmaputra and has persistently kept aloof from Hindu innovations. According to Captain Fisher, about a thousand years ago the ruling caste was forced south by the continual pressure of the Koch race, and they are next found and indeed for the first time as a historical fact, at Dimapur in the Naga Hills, to the north of the *Barail* watershed. By this date a new kingdom had been formed in the Assam Valley, the ruling race being the Ahoms. This completed the work of disintegration, which the *Koches* are said to have begun, in the original Cachari Empire. At Dimapur, the Cachari king and aristocracy made a stand, and built a brick city, now buried in jungle, of which the ruins are still extant. They were afterwards again forced southwards, but made a second stand at Maibong, now a dense forest valley, between two spurs of the *Barail* Hill on the north side of the watershed. Plantain, betel nut and mango trees are still found growing in the forest, as well as the ruins of a brick fort, from which the materials for the present court-house at *Asalu* were quarried. Several little stone temples also remain. While at Maibong, the king is said to have married the daughter of the Tipperah Raja, with whom he received as dowry the valley of Barak and its tributaries. This marriage is supposed to have occurred about the
beginning or middle of the seventeenth century. The king and his aristocracy remained for a time at Maibong; but their new possessions on the south of the watershed brought them into contact with the Bengalis of Sylhet. The Cacharis at Maibong consisted of – (i) the king, court, and aristocracy or the Barmans; and (ii) the Dans or Parbottias, the representatives of the original Cachari race, who were still at the tribal stage of social and economic organization.

At Maibong, a new enemy appeared on the scene. The Jaintia Raja on the West now began to do what the Koch and Ahom had formerly done, the net result of these new aggressions being that, sometime between 1700 and 1750, the Cachari king and his Barmans were again forced southwards. They crossed the Borail range settled at Khaspur, immediately bellow the watershed, but among its southern spurs. From their arrival at Khaspur the distinct history of Cachar commences. Numerous Bengali colonies, who came up to the Barak Valley from Sylhet, had meanwhile planted their first settlements on the Northern side of the river, shortly after passing the Sylhet Frontier. It is supposed that Musalman Bengalis also migrated into Cachar about the same time. At first the new comers seem to have simply cleared land as stray settlers, paying rent to the Cachari Raja. By degrees, as they became stronger, they obtained from the prince a sort of constitution, which protected them from interference on the part of Cachar tax gatherers and court officials. Thus, when the British took possession of the district in 1832, they found two distinct systems of administration in existence. One of these dealt with the Cachari subjects, consisting of a gradation of officials, who held appointments which would involve a minute control over the subjects, but for the circumstance that there were hardly any subject to control. The only people subject to their immediate authority were the uncivilized hill tribes of Parbatias, Cacharis, Kukis, Nagas, etc. Among these officers were a Bara Bhandari (chief law man), with a large establishment of subordinate law-men; a Senapati or general, with a number of superior officers, not quite as titular as the law-men; also a religious establishment of Cachari Barmans, to perform sacrifices for the health of the king and the safety of the people. These sacrifices were handed down from primitive times and could only be performed by the descendants of the native Cachari priests. Among them was a human sacrifice for the Raja, celebrated on certain great occasion.

The Bengalis on the other hand, were almost independent of these officers. Their great aim here, as elsewhere, was to keep themselves a peculiar people. They sought
only for as much as would secure them from interference. They had a constitution of
their own, based on a revenue system, now peculiar to Cachar, which is perhaps a
vestige of the once great Cachari kingdom. The fundamental principle of this system
was the holding of land by a number of persons connected by voluntary association.
The unit of the system was the *Khel*. Just as in Hindu communities the village forms
the agricultural commonwealth, which is bound together, theoretically or practically,
by ties of kinship and caste, so the *Khel* formed the unit of the agricultural community
of Cachar, but its members were not connected by any ties of kinship, caste, nationality, or creed. From the first, Musalmans and Hindus are found side by side in
the same *Khel*; and now that this principle of voluntary association has extended to
other enterprises, no bar of race or creed is opposed to the admission of any part of the
population. Thus there are instances of association for leasing fisheries or catching
elephants, which include not only Bengalis of every caste and creed, but *Kukis, Nagas*
and even Europeans. When the Manipuris began to settle in Cachar they were at first
inclined to be exclusive, and to association taking land only with their own race. But
since the British accession they have fallen into the general scheme and now a
Manipuri often takes a lease along with a Musalman or Hindu, to the exclusion of a
man of his own race, who may be objectionable on account of his temper or character.
It is a voluntary co-partnership of a number of persons for the purpose of carrying on
a specified undertaking, acknowledging no other nexus except community of interest.
This nexus does not extend to community of capital or of profits, for as soon as the
common lease is obtained, the land is divided by the partners among themselves, and
each sets up for himself on his own allotment. They acknowledge, however,
reciprocal obligations so far as may be necessary for carrying out the original
undertaking. Thus, a sharer would be considered a wrongdoer, who, by failing to
cultivate his portion, allowed it to become a haunt for wild beasts, to the injury of the
neighboring allotments. In such cases the sharer used to apply to the Raja, who simply
ordered the negligent partner to till the land. The British officer in-charge of the
District was in the eyes of the people, the legitimate successor of the Raja, with the
same plenary powers and they now brought similar applications to him. On his verbal
award the defaulter immediately set to work and did his duty to the co-partnership.
But although the nexus was weak as between the individual sharers, it was absolutely
inseparable as regards their obligations to the ruling power.
Thus, in other Districts, the police would find the laborers for the collector when wanted; but in Cachar the Deputy Commissioner, through these corporations found labor not only for himself, but for the police. The first common obligation, viz. that of paying the rent, still remains. The payment of rent was originally done through an agent (muktar) appointed by the sharers and confirmed by the sovereign. He was generally the leading man and principal sharer in the corporation and seems to have been primarily responsible to the Raja for the rent. That is to say, if he came up to court with a deficient payment and a lame excuse, he was the man on whom the royal wrath fell, and who was squeezed in the first instance, before steps were taken against the corporation.

In course of time, as the number of Khels increased, groups of adjacent Khels were joined together into larger unions, marking the second stage in their development of principle of voluntary association in the Cachar revenue system. The larger union was called a Raj; and as each Khel had been represented at court by its principal sharer as agent, so each Raj elected the principal man in it, or the Head man of the chief Khel, as its own representative. In both cases the Raja’s approval was required and a title seems usually to have been conferred on the officer who represented the Raj. These titles were of Bengali origin. The representative of the larger union was entitled Chaudhari, Mazumder, Laskar, Bara-Bhuiya or Chuta-Bhuiya, according to his social status and the comparative importance of the union he represented. Of these titles, the only one requiring notice is Laskar, which extend far up into the Garo Hills, where the head man of agricultural villagers was called by the same name. These titles originally clung to the land and its representatives, but before the British obtained possession of the country they had become transferable at a fixed scale of prices. The title of Chaudhari fetched Rs.10; that of Mazumder Rs. 8; that of Laskar Rs. 6; Bara-Bhuiya Rs. 5; and Chuta-Bhuiya probably Rs. 4. The titles were hereditary and descended to all the sons and their descendants. By degrees the unions began to separate in to classes. Those that paid their whole rent to the Raja were called Khelma and their representative Khelma Laskar or Khelma Chaudhuri. The general process was that the sharers in each guild or Khel paid their portion of the rent to the Khel muktar or agent. Each Khel muktar paid the total rent of his Khel to the Raj muktar, who in his turn paid it to the Raja at the Royal residence. The office of muktar or agent was theoretically elective and at first, no doubt the holders of it were
actually elected. By degrees, however, the office became hereditary, either the eldest son or next male relative succeeding with more or less show of election.

By the development of this system, the Bengalis practically obtained a constitution, which in quiet times was sufficient to preserve them from all interference on the part of the royal officers. In the first place, it secured them from the visits of the revenue officials. Once the lease was given, and the Khel or agricultural guild was established, the sharers had an elective organization of their own for collecting the rent and for depositing it in the royal treasury. As their representatives were primarily responsible for the rent, and no doubt were often imprisoned, or otherwise made to appease the royal indignation, in case of default, they probably assumed petty powers, judicial and fiscal, with a view to providing against the contingency of default and of forcing the individual guildsmen to pay up their shares. At all events, the fact remains that they did acquire such powers and at the date of the British occupation they appear in the light of an un-paid magistracy, with fiscal and communal powers. All were alike subjects of the sovereign, and each derived his title from him. But the fiscal gradation of guild representation was carried in to the un-paid magisterial service, the guild representative being inferior in his criminal functions to the union representative, if indeed he had any acknowledged and properly conferred powers at all. At the head of all was the League Representative of Bikrampur, the first Hindu subject of the Cachari Raja. As the insignia of his office, a whip was bestowed on him by his sovereign, and he exercised an indistinct sort of primacy among the other union representatives. The king retained his judicial prerogative in all heinous offences, such as murder; and there seems to be some probability that the Bara mazumder (Cachari chief law men), the raj pandit (Hindu spiritual guide to the king), and the Bara mazumder (principal union representative) sat in a sort of judicial committee to advise the Raja in capital cases.

The fact that the Hindu civil code dependent on the Sastras, and the Musalman code on the Quran, of both of which the Cachari Raja was equally ignorant, forced the immigrants to depend on some voluntary organization for settling their internal disputes and their head men were thus entrusted with certain fiscal and criminal powers. These criminal powers depended upon the representative status of the league heads, and not upon the title conferred by the Raja. While the fiscal and criminal administration was thus provided for with the minimum of royal interferences, civil
disputes were settled without any interference whatever. In case of a difference between the sharers of a khel, the matter was referred to the khel muktar, who probably took advice of the elders on the subject; if he could not settle the dispute, the question was referred to the raj muktar or union representative. In disputes between the khels, the court of the first instance was the League Head, who, with the assistance of a council selected from the different khels within his raj, heard and decided the case. It is not clear whether any legal organization existed for enforcing such decrees; but the fiscal and criminal powers of the Raj muktar gave him a large and loose authority, and, as a matter of fact, his decree was enforced by the imprisonment of any person who delayed to obey. In difficult or keenly contested cases, an appeal or reference could be made to the raj pandit. In such cases the Sovereign parties were Hindus, and that officer repeated the Sastras and laid down the law. In Musalman cases the Raja consulted with whoever was the chief acknowledged exponent, for the time being, of the Quran.

The grant to guilds for the clearing of land was subject to an implied proviso that the Raja might subsequently resume any part of the land which should be required for state purposes. In case of default of payment of revenue of the khel, all of the sharers were jointly and severally responsible. In case of the default of one of the individual sharers to pay his quota, any of the other sharers might step in, and by paying the defaulter’s share obtain possession of his holding. (Hunter, 1879, vol. ii, pp. 393-400).

2.2.4: THE INFLUENCE OF HINDUISM:

The Cacharies reached Khaspur between 1700 and 1750, and came in contact with Hinduism. It is a universal tendency of all partially civilized tribes in India to accept Hinduism, thereby to increase their superiority over the surrounding barbarians. Brahmans from Sylhet had lived in the capital, and perhaps in the palace, for several generations before the Barman Cacharies embraced Hinduism. With the conversion of the king to the fold of Hinduism, these Brahmans became the spiritual guides and obtained the title of Raj pandit. In 1790, Raja Krishna Chandra, together with his brother Govind Chandra, made a public profession of Brahmanism with certain expiatory rites.

Thus, the Cacharies, having practiced a gloomy demon-worship, adopted the rites of Kali, the wife of the All-Destroyer, in their most horrible form, and identified her with
their own female demon *Rana Chandi*. The Manipuries on the other hand, having had bright nature worship and an intense love of flowers, became followers of Krishna. The Parbattia Cacharis, who still remained in their original state, worshiped the spirits who have authority over the powers of nature. The first Hindu shrines, which appear to have been built by the Cacharies, have long been abandoned. They were situated amid a jungle, which is now included in a tea grant. The religious traditions are supported by the legendary evidences like one related to *Rana Chandi*, the tutelary goddess of Cachar. (Hunter, 1879 pp400-404)

Meanwhile, during the eighteenth century, the frontiers of Burma were invaded by the Manipuri Raja. Afterwards the Burmese commenced reprisals, and in the early years of the nineteenth century the Cacharis, insecure at Khaspur, were compelled to shift their capital to Garbetta, in Bikrampur Pargana, a place situated between the spurs of two hills. Here they built an earthen mound across the extremities of the spurs. This mound is now a trim tea garden, in some places over twenty feet high and broad enough at the top for three or four horsemen to ride abreast. After this the capital again became insecure, and another shift was rendered necessary.

The reign of Govind Chandra, the last king, was, in fact, one of perpetual flight. On one occasion he was compelled to take refuge in Sylhet, and settled at Haritikar, on the north side of Barak, a short distance above the point where that river divides into the Kusiara and Surma. He was restored to his throne by the British Government in 1826, when the Burmese were expelled, as an epilogue to the First Burmese War. Four years after his restoration he was assassinated, and as he left no legitimate successor, the British took possession of Cachar in accordance with a clause in the treaty of 1826.

The commander in-chief or *Senapati* of the last Raja’s forces was one Tularam, who for some reason was disgraced and sent in to Northern Cachar as Governor of Maibong, where he subsequently managed to establish his independence. When the British assumed the possession of the country in 1830, they made a treaty with Tularam, acknowledging his sovereignty in Northern Cachar, north of the *Barail* range, which he had succeeded in wresting from Gobind Chandra. On the death of Tularam, his territory was annexed to the Assam District of Nagaon; and in 1866, when the new Deputy Commissionership of the Naga Hills was formed, part of it was
thrown into that District, part remained with Nagaon, and the rest was added to Cachar. (Hunter, 1879, vol. ii, pp 400-403).

2.2.5: THE ECONOMY OF BARAK VALLEY:

Since the British took possession of Assam, there has been a considerable and steady progress in the material conditions of the people. It is mainly due to the spread of agriculture and the increase in population consequent upon the introduction of the tea cultivation. In 1855, the discovery of tea tree growing wild in the jungles of Cachar was the signal for the display of European enterprise. But the main occupation of almost all the inhabitants of the District remained agriculture; their attention was directed solely to the cultivation of their fields, and they made no attempt to carry out undertakings tending to improve their condition. Even in agriculture they raised no more than what they thought sufficient to supply their own wants. Cachar is a fertile valley, and many valuable products might be raised without difficulty and at a considerable profit; but the people were contented with what nature granted them with little labour and expense, and they evinced no desire to gain more.

AGRICULTURE: Rice forms the staple crop in Cachar District, as also throughout the rest of Assam. It yields three harvests in the year: (i) The aus, or early crop: the aus crop has different varieties of rice like damai, murali and khasalu of which the last is only grown to a small extent. All three varieties are sown with the first showers of April. The damai and murali are sown broadcast after the land has been ploughed; the seedling of the khasalu is transplanted from nurseries in the same manner as the sail crop. The land chosen for aus is generally of an inferior quality, and it must be above the flood level. The regular harvest time is August; but if the April rains fail, the seed is not sown till May, and the crop does not ripen till September; (ii) The sail or aman: The sail or aman crop which constitutes by far the largest portion of the food supply embraces more than 25 varieties, of which the two finest are known as harinarayan and kalijira. The three commonest varieties are the walmegh, hatimura, and khaiaru. The most appropriate land for this crop is the plain and low-lying, but not marshy land. The seed is first sown in nurseries or charas generally in the month of June or July, provided that there has been sufficient rain. These nurseries are situated on comparatively high land, and the soil is some times subjected to as many as ten or twelve ploughings before the seed is thrown in; (iii) The asra or ek fasli: It
is sown about the same time as the *aus*, but it is not reaped until December and January. It is always sown on low, marshy lands. The total area under this crop is not large.

In the hills, rice is grown in an altogether different method known as *Jhum*, which still continues in its primitive wastefulness, undisturbed by the Forest Department. The land is first cleared by burning down the jungle. About March the seed is sown in holes dibbled among the ashes with the *dao* or hill knife, and the crop is reaped in November. The seeds of various other crops, such as Indian corn, mustard, and cotton are planted in the holes by the side of the rice, and each is gathered in order as it comes to maturity. This process is repeated for two or three years with some variations, and after the third year the clearing is abandoned for a fresh tract of jungle.

**GREEN CROPS:** The principal crop of this denomination grown in Cachar is mustard or *sarisha*, linseed or *tisi*, and a sort of pulse called *kalai*. A second variety, called *siala*, is also grown to a small extent on *chara* lands, but it is of no value as an oil seed, and is chiefly cultivated for fodder. Linseed is grown in the cold season on lands that have been under water during the rains. Among the fibres, the hemp and jute also grow in small quantities for the purpose of local consumption.

**FIBRES:** Hemp and jute are grown in small quantities for purpose of local consumption. Hemp is grown here and there along the banks of river. It is divided into two kinds-1) the *aus*, sown in April and cut in August; and 2) the *sail* sown in November and cut in March. Both kinds are sown broadcast. Jute is grown on *chara* lands. The seed is put in April, and the crop is ready for cutting by August. Sugar cane is cultivated only to a limited extent; chilies of various kinds are also grown in homestead lands for domestic consumption.

**TEA PLANTATION:** Another important gift that Cachar received from the British administration was the Tea plantation. As an inherent rule of colonialism, the British rulers tried to exploit the region to its maximum. They found whole Assam as physically most suitable region for growing tea plants on large scale and soon it became one of the important tea producing zones in the whole world. The plantation started in 1885. The planters were mostly Europeans, although some wealthy Bengalees of the Valley owned tea gardens. The labour force was entirely recruited from Bihar, Orissa and Chotonagpur. One pertinent point to be mentioned here is that,
the economic condition of the local people was really sound and this is best supported by the fact that no villagers would agree to work as labour in the tea estates and that is why the Government had to import labourers for this purpose from outside Assam. Their massive migration transformed the demographic structure very significantly and distinct social group of tea labourers belonging to different tribes from outside emerged in the region.

MANUFACTURES: Among indigenous industries, the spinning and weaving of cotton occupies the first place. Coarse cloth, woven by the Jogi caste of Hindus, supplied the wants of the other low castes. Among the hill tribes the women made all the clothing required for the family. The Manipuri women had gained a special reputation for their cotton cloth, called khesh, which was woven in various sizes and colors, and found a market beyond the limits of the District. They also manufactured a kind of fine net for mosquito curtains. The kuki women made puris or rugs for sale. Another specialty of the Manipuris was the manufacture of brass vessels, which was carried on by them to a considerable extent at the village of Katigora. In Kaliganj, a type of mat famous as sital pati was very popular. A large number of tea boxes were required in the gardens every year. Most of these were manufactured in the District from the produce of the neighboring jungles. Within the last few years a saw-mill, worked by water and steam, has been started near Badarpur, in order to supply the increasing demand of wood. The only other industry worth notice was the manufacture of hardware, such as daos or hill knives, axes, and spades.

TRADE AND COMMERCE: There was no place in Cachar of much commercial importance. Trade was usually carried on at haat (bazaars) or permanent market in different places of Cachar like- Janiganj, Barkhala, Udharbond, Lakshipur etc. to which the hill tribes brought down different items like- cotton, bees-wax, to barter for salt and iron tools. At Lakshipur, which was the chief centre of trade with Manipur, dried fish and betel-nuts were also exported in considerable quantities. Sonai, on the bank of Barak River, was the headquarters of the timber trade; Sialtekh, on the bank of the same river, was the station where timber passing down paid toll. The tolls were leased out annually to the highest bidder, and in 1874-75 were let for £1500. There were petty bazaars on almost every tea garden for the convenience of the imported coolies. An annual mela fair was held at the station of Silchar on the 30th December, which lasted for ten or twelve days. The attendance was estimated about 20,000
persons, and traders came here from Sylhet and Dacca. In former days buffaloes and ponies from Manipur and Burma were largely sold at this mela. A similar mela of less importance was held at Siddheswar, on the Barak River, near the Sylhet boundary on 18th or 19th of March, and the fair only lasted for one day. It was held in connection with a religious gathering and bathing ceremony, which took place on the opposite bank of the river. The same articles were brought for sale as at the Silchar mela.

Since the pacification of the Kuki or Lushai tribes, consequent on the retaliatory expedition of 1871-72, a promising field for commercial enterprise was opened up on the Southern frontier of the District. Three bazaars or marts were established at the most frequented hill passes: - i) on the Dhaleswari river; ii) on the Sonai; and iii) on the Tipai. The trade at these bazaars was chiefly conducted by barter. The Bengali traders brought up rice, salt, tobacco, brass ware, beads, cloth, etc., which they exchanged for cotton, ivory, wax, and puri cloth.

The external commerce of Cachar was entirely conducted by water, and passed through the neighbouring district of Sylhet. The staple export, of course, was tea. Next in importance were Caoutchouc, brought down from the southern hills, and timber. The cotton cloth woven by the Manipuri women, and by the women of other wild tribes, and also the brass ware of the Manipuris, were the only articles of local manufacture produced in sufficient quantities to leave a surplus for export; but the total value of this trade was insignificant. The chief article of import was rice, for the local crops were altogether inadequate to supply the demand of the coolies on the tea plantations. The other imports were cotton goods, both of European and native manufacture, salt, hardware, and all articles of luxury required by the European planters, among which ‘liquor’ occupied a prominent place.

**ROADS AND MEANS OF COMMUNICATION:** In 1853 Mr. Mills reported that there was only one road in the District, which had not been repaired for years. But in comparison to the neighboring district of Sylhet the means of communication was comparatively good and it is probably because of tea planters, whose interests was to have good means of communication between their gardens and the river Barak, by which their tea was dispatched and all their supplies were received. Foreign trade was carried on entirely by water. Some of the roads counted by the then Deputy Commissioner included two roads under the management of the Public Works
Department, one of these was the road from Sylhet to Silchar running along the bank of the river Barak, the other was called the Lakhipur Road which leads eastward of Silchar to Jiri river where it joined the main route to Manipur. The fifteen other roads connected to the different tea garden of the districts were also functioning. The Assam Administrative Reports for 1875-76, thus returned the mileage of the means of communication in Cachar: Navigable rivers, 361 miles; second class roads, 208 miles; third class roads, 300 miles.

**POSITION OF THE CULTIVATORS:** In Cachar, the indigenous settlement was *Rayatwari* i.e. the revenue was assessed by Government direct with the cultivators, who were termed *mirasdars*. A cultivator’s holding was considered large if it exceeded one *hal*, or about 5 acres of land, and small if less than six *khears*, or about 2.5 acres. One pair of oxen could cultivate 6 or 7 *khears*, or about 3 acres of land; but the common plough cattle in Cachar were buffaloes, a pair of which can cultivate as much as one *hal* or five acres. The condition of the Cachar cultivators was one of comparative affluence. There was waste land in abundance close to their villages, which they could take up from Government on easy terms; and the rates of assessment on land already under tillage were not excessive. Natural calamities were infrequent. Each family grew sufficient to supply all its modest wants, and the surplus found a ready sale among the coolies on the tea gardens. As a consequence, indebtedness was very rare; and the natives of the District were very unwilling to work for others, even at the high wages offered by the planters. (Hunter, 1879, vol. ii, pp 405-414).

**2.2.6: THE REVENUE SYSTEM OF CACHAR UNDER ITS NATIVE RAJAS:**

At first the rent was extremely low, the earliest mentioned rates being a he-goat, a pair of fowls, a duck, and two coco-nuts from each holding, irrespective of its size. Subsequently the rent was fixed at 12 *annas* for each *hal*. Kartik Chandra raised the rate for the *hal* to Rs- 3; and it is said that Gobind Chandra, the last of the Cachari Rajas, obtained from some lands as much as Rs-6 per *hal*. The lands which of course were originally under jungle were settled not with individuals, but with corporations called *rajs*. Each *raj*, again, was sub-divided into minor corporations or *khels*, which formed the real units of the revenue system. Each individual in the *khel* was held jointly and severally responsible for the revenue assessed on the *khel*, similarly each *khel* was responsible for the payments of its raj. The *khel* elected its own mouthpiece,
known as a **muktar**. Certain portion of the area allotted to each **khel** was appropriated rent free to persons of standing; and of the lands remaining, every man received as much as he could cultivate. The system of rent free grants was discontinued by Govinda Chandra, but the influence and recognized position of the grantees endured long afterwards. The head-men of the **raj** and **khel** were primarily responsible for the revenue, which was collected in the following fashion: - A Cachari peon was sent to the house of the head-man with a demand for payment. The head-man then sounded a drum or fired a gun if the demand was urgent. When the people came together the revenue was forthwith collected. Defaulters, after being allowed a short respite, were arrested and brought before the Raja. If it appeared that they had no means, the sharers in the **taluk**, or separate estate, were invited to enter upon the defaulters’ land, on condition of satisfying the arrears. If they declined, the holding was given to the **khel**. If the **khel** failed to pay, the land lapsed to the **raj**, which could not be refused. The **paikan khel** was the name of an estate, the rent of which was devoted to the expenses of the worshipping the goddess Ran Chandi; Vishnughar **khel** was appropriated to Lakshmi Narayan; and Bhisingsa **khel**, to the goddess **Shama** or **Kali**. Many of these last mentioned **khels** are now called **mauzas**. (Hunter, 1879, vol. ii, pp 414-16).

Thus, the socio-cultural scenario of Cachar was semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature. It was on this socio-political formation that the British administration was to operate.

The internal contradictions which the Kachari rulers failed to resolve, paved the way for neighboring rulers’ intervention and throwing the entire society of Cachar Valley into a state of uncertainty and gloom. At this critical stage, the colonial ruler intervened and colonized Cachar. It was annexed to British dominion by a proclamation issued by the Board of East India Company on August 14, 1832. The colonization gradually broke the isolation of Cachar by making it a part of British India and thereby linking it with the colonial capitalist world economy. The penetration of colonialism added new complexities with serious socio-political and economic ramification into the hybrid social formation composed of the Bengalees and the Tribals. Cachar’s incorporation into the colonial system led to the abandonment of the Kachari way of administration. Initially, the colonizers patronized the pre-colonial Kachari aristocracy in their administration. With the passage of time, this system did not fit into the new system based on bureaucratic principle of
maintaining formal and written records. Hence it was replaced by a new British-Mughul system of administration. Thus, modern western education became a pre-condition for the entry into the colonial administration. In case of Cachar, this vacuum was filled by the districts of Bengal which was colonized much earlier. Without any investment in Western education in Assam, the colonizers profitably availed the service of the already surplus educated unemployed persons from Bengal Presidency.

Immediately after annexation, the local officials realized that unless the depopulated lands were resettled and fallow tracts were brought under cultivation, material progress would be adversely affected. Accordingly, a systematic policy was followed to increase population. Captain Fisher, the then Superintendent of Cachar, took the initiative in this regard and he made the official arrangement for the settlement. Accordingly, people from different corners accepted land in Cachar and they were mostly Bengalees from the district of Sylhet, Mymensing and Komilla. The earliest Bengalee population of Cachar belonged to agrarian community. It is to be mentioned that during the British rule, Bengalees of all castes had migrated to Cachar. But, because of its agrarian base bulk of its population were agriculturist and belonged to the lower strata of Hindu social hierarchy, namely-Nath, Patnis, Jogis and Namasudras. Several factors influenced their permanent migration, the most important ones being severe feudal oppression by the landlords to which these people were subjected to in their original homeland and also the meagre land revenue in Cachar compared to other parts of the sub-continent. Interaction of these factors under the colonial aegis propelled the migration of the oppressed East Bengal Peasants to Cachar.

Like other regions in India, the British conquest led to a revolution in the existing land holding system in Cachar. The Royatwari system introduced by the British superseded the traditional right of the guild over the land and it also started qualitatively different land revenue system. The colonial system monetized the land revenue system and the users had to pay the revenue direct to the Government. As mentioned earlier, the inhabitants of Cachar were agriculturists. The peasants had either Khasland in their possession or land held in sub-tenancy. This agrarian population was known as Mirasdar in Cachar. It needs to be mentioned here that since the Dimasa Kingdom in Cachar was not within British domain in 1789, the permanent settlement was not introduced there. Thus, the land system of the pre-
partitioned district of Cachar differed from that of Sylhet district. As a result, it was only in Karimganj region that the permanent system was in vogue in 1947, when this part of Sylhet became a part of Cachar district.

The British colonizers established a distinctly new type of structure in Indian subcontinent. It was highly centralized and ramified in the remotest corners of the country. They established hierarchically graded public services which brought about administrative unification of the country. Immediately after annexation, Cachar was placed under a superintendent to be administered as a non-regulated province under the control of the agent to the Governor General of North East Frontier. But, the geographical location and the socio-economic closeness of the two districts compelled the administrators to introduce the normal rules and regulations that were applicable in Sylhet. When Cachar passed under the commissioner of Dacca in 1836, many of the departments had common heads for Cachar and Sylhet. Needless to say, the British Government of India was an organized bureaucracy run by hierarchy of officials. The commissioner of Surma Valley supervised the general affairs of the division, while the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar was in-charge of the district. For the purpose of general administration Cachar was divided into three sub-divisions viz-Silchar, Hailakandi and Haflong. In 1869, Hailakandi Division was created and placed under an Assistant Magistrate. In matters of judicial administration, the Deputy Commissioner acted as the District Civil Judge.

The urbanization was indeed a colonial contribution. The district and Sub-Divisional headquarters first grow into towns. Silchar became a municipality in 1860 and Hailakandi Sub-Division was managed by a Town Committee. The traders came mostly from Marwar, Rajputana (Today’s Rajasthan). The local people took to petty shop keeping in a limited way. The communication which was hitherto so underdeveloped, gradually improved under British regime. At the initiative of public works department (PWD), a number of roads were constructed. The most important being the Cachar Trunk Road, Silchar-Hailakandi Road, Silchar-Sylhet Road, and Jatinga Valley Road. The actual line of communication with outside world was, however, opened with the extension of the rail link. The Assam Bengal Railway covered Silchar in 1899. The Calcutta-Silchar and Calcutta-Karimganj steamer services were introduced by British Capitalist owned Joint Stock Company. There
were ferry services in the river ghats in the valley. Improvement of communication established a close contact between the different parts of the country.

As a result of massive migration of various groups, distinct and new social groups gradually emerged in the Colonial Cachar in addition to the existing pre-colonial social groups. These new groups can be classified as shown in table 8 below. In order to understand the colonial society it would be necessary to comprehend the emerging class structure and dynamics in addition to social groups.

The Europeans though very small in number, was obviously the most powerful group. The Bengalees who came from lower provinces to assist the colonial rulers as their subordinates formed another group. In the absence of an indigenous business class, the Marwaris filled up the vacuum in big business. The Biharies came as labourers mostly in tea garden work. The migrant Muslim peasants occupied most of the waste and low lying land in Cachar. The plantation labour came from places in both North and South India and toiled to build massive tea estate in Cachar. In addition to these groups there was another small group, the Manipuries who were granted land by Captain Fisher, the then Superintendent of Cachar. These Manipuri grantees were settled in Cachar after they had been chased away by the Burmese from their own home land. They were mostly engaged in cultivation. Thus, in the early part of 20th century the present day Barak Valley stood as Karimganj Sub-Division of erstwhile Sylhet District, Hailakandi and Silchar Sub-Divisions of Cachar District under the greater Surma Valley division.

Administratively there existed two types of administration i.e. Karimganj being the part of Sylhet and greater Bengal Suba, was under the direct administration of the Mughals in the Medieval time and the early British administration following the defeat of Siraz ud daula, the Nawab of Bengal at the hands of the East India Company in the Battle of Plassy 1757 A.D. Contrary to this, the present districts of Cachar and Hailakandi were never under the Mughal administration and the British administration had a late headstart in the region only after 1826, following the Treaty of Yandaboo signed as a mark to the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War. They were under the Tribal administration for centuries. Culturally, though for centuries Cachar and Sylhet maintained a close affinity, but practically what we see is that Sylhet being Bengali
majority district flourished in Bengali culture, but in Cachar along with the Bengali
culture more conservative tribal culture was also practiced.

Karimganj, being a part of Sylhet district, was inhabited by the Bengalees, both
Hindus and Muslims also practised the same culture. But in Cachar, a tribal
influenced region, a mixed culture was practised. The population of Cachar was a
composition of the aboriginal tribal groups, the Bengali migrants both Hindus and
Muslims, a sizeable population of Manipuries both Hindus and Muslims, the tea
garden laborers migrated from Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other places, and the
small group of Marwaris - the business group.

The population composition of Barak Valley (Table 7) comprised of a varied socio-
cultural background. The Bengali Hindus, of whom the majority belonged to lower
castes, mainly the peasants and artisans, restricted to their traditional caste based
occupations and concentrated in the rural areas. Some belonging to the Intermediate
Castes and small group of Hindu Upper Castes, involved in Government services as
administrators, clerks, teachers, and other non-manual jobs in the administration
mostly concentrated in to the urban areas.

The Bengali Muslims, mainly the peasants involved in agriculture and cleaning the
jungle for expanding the area for cultivation, inhabited the villages predominantly. A
small group of them worked as artisans and some were involved in the administrative
jobs, inhabiting in the urban region.

The Manipuries, the majority whom were Hindus were mainly agriculturists and some
were involved in some handicrafts and inhabited the villages.

The tea garden workers, migrant from the neighboring states of Orissa, Uttar Pradesh,
Jharkhand, and Bihar, sizeable in number, also formed another group of population in
the region. The aboriginal tribal groups like – the Cachari, Dimasa, Kuki, Khasi, Naga,
Mizo, Sonowal and others, though small in population size, dependent mainly on
agriculture inhabited the hills of the region.

The small group of Marwari’s involved in business centering in the urban areas only.
This demographic composition continues till today in the Valley.
Table-7:
The Major Social Groups in Colonial Barak Valley

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality / Community</th>
<th>Major occupation/s</th>
<th>Size and social standing in Colonial Cachar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The British</td>
<td>They were the Colonial administrator, dealing with Civil and Military affairs, Members of Christian Mission, Tea planters etc.</td>
<td>They were small but powerful, and influential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American</td>
<td>They were mainly the Members of Christian Mission.</td>
<td>They were small and influential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Marwaris</td>
<td>They were the Traders and businessmen.</td>
<td>They were small group, but rich and organized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Caste Hindu Bengalese</td>
<td>They were the holders of Lower grade jobs in the administration, Tea garden and legal and academic professions.</td>
<td>They were Large in size and worked as collaborator and harbingers of new ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lower Caste Hindu Bengalese</td>
<td>They were holding the traditional profession, agriculture, weaving, fishing etc.</td>
<td>They were larger group, economically oppressed and hardly influential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Muslim Bengalese</td>
<td>They were the Peasants, artisans and skilled labourers.</td>
<td>They were also formed the larger group, but unprivileged and poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Manipuris</td>
<td>They were mainly engaged in cultivation and handicrafts.</td>
<td>They were the small group, poor and not influential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Biharis</td>
<td>Mainly the labourers</td>
<td>They were Small, hard working and largely oppressed group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Black Tribes</td>
<td>Mainly the tea garden workers migrated from other states.</td>
<td>They were small, poor and largely oppressed group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mongoloid Tribes</td>
<td>The aboriginal natives of the land, engaged mainly on Primitive agriculture.</td>
<td>They were Small in size, poor, nomadic and semi nomadic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above description it is evident that, the Barak Valley region consists of a multi cultural, multi religious, and multi lingual population since long. There evolved a gradual shift from tribal social formation to the most advanced urban social formation. The mixing of languages with each other led to the development of interlinguistic culture, and dependency towards the dominant language. As a result, the majority of the population in Barak Valley appeared as the Bengali speaking, baring few a Hindi speakers.